

## Analysis of Attitudinal Resources in China-Related News in *The Star Online*

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### ABSTRACT

*The portrayal of nations in media discourse not only reflects current events but also potentially shapes public perceptions and relationships between countries. This study examines the representation of China, Malaysia's largest trading partner, in Malaysian news, an area previously under-explored. Utilising the Appraisal Framework, we examine attitudinal resources that describe China, thereby assessing how the nation is linguistically and semantically positioned in The Star Online, a leading Malaysian news source. To reveal the underlying attitudes towards China, this study adapts the existing scheme of the UAM CorpusTool for detailed annotation, examining one representative news article from each year over a decade (2012-2021) in The Star Online. Our findings reveal: 1) positive attitudes prevail in the selected news articles; 2) linguistic resources of JUDGMENT are predominant among the three attitudinal types, which means evaluation of behaviours is observed more often in the selected news; 3) the positive attitudes towards China reflect Malaysians' positive perception of China's economic strength, reliability, and optimistic outlook on favourable outcomes in the future. The results reflect a generally positive attitude towards China in The Star Online, which not only verify the workability of the theory, method, and instrument used in discourse analysis but also enrich the study of Malaysian news discourse.*

*Keywords: Appraisal Theory; Attitude; Polarity; China-Related News; The Star Online*

## INTRODUCTION

China and Malaysia have been extending communication and cooperation with each other since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1974. Cooperation between the two countries in the past five decades has been consolidated, and China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years (MATRADE, 2023). Amidst the close cooperation, however, the bilateral relationship has also encountered challenges, such as the overlapping claims relating to the areas of the South China Sea and Malaysia's cancellation of three mega cooperative projects with China. These occasional obstacles, though inevitable in any partnership, underscore the need for a comprehensive understanding of how China is perceived by Malaysian media. Media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and perceptions. The portrayals of China in Malaysian media not only reflect the dynamics of their relationship but also influence public opinion, as the positive portrayals of China will lead to trust in China and support of Malaysia-China cooperation, while negative portrayals may create disquiet or fear.

*The Star* is known for its government-aligned stance in Malaysia (Liang, 2014; Pang, 2006). Analysis of its news allows researchers to explore how the Malaysian government seeks to influence public sentiment towards China, which is essential for assessing the potential impact on bilateral relations. As Fowler (1991) contends, news is not an impartial reflection of reality but a constructed product that both mirrors and influences the dominant societal values and beliefs of its time. Thus, exploring news discourse is a crucial way for linguists to understand how language constructs and affects social ideologies and attitudes.

In our earlier research (Wu et al., 2022), we used Azure Machine Learning to conduct automated sentiment analysis on a decade's worth (2012-2021) of China-related news in *The Star Online*, the digital platform of *The Star*. The findings indicated a predominant negative sentiment in these articles. However, further analysis of the keywords, collocates, and concordance lines suggested that the negative sentiment might not be directed towards China but could be attributed to specific unfortunate events occurring at that time. This is because sentiment analysis generates results based on the text as a whole. Besides, implicit sentiment may not be apparent at the surface level that the machine will identify. "Discourse analysis is the study of language-in-use" (Gee, 2011, p. 8). It provides a powerful methodological tool for examining the context in which language is used, enabling us to uncover not only the explicit content but also the implied meanings and implications. In this study, the aim is to explore the attitudes towards China in *The Star Online* under the analytical framework of Appraisal Theory in the hope of providing a holistic understanding of China through the lenses of Malaysian media. Through discourse analysis, we intend to answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the polarity of attitude towards China?
- 2) What attitudinal resources are mostly observed in evaluating China?
- 3) What are the implications of such results?

## APPRAISAL THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION

Appraisal Theory (AT), situated within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), was developed in the late 1990s as a means to examine evaluative language. SFL posits that language fulfils three metafunctions: the ideational, which interprets human experience; the interpersonal, which builds

social roles and relationships; and the textual, which organises text cohesively (Halliday, 1994). AT extends this framework by analysing evaluation through grammar, individual words, phrases, and entire statements. The following sections will detail AT's three subsystems and review research that has utilised AT for analysis.

## INTRODUCTION TO AT

Appraisal is “the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something is good or bad (Thompson, 2004, p. 75)”. It is closely linked to modality, as both concepts are concerned with the speaker’s or writer’s attitude. Central to AT is the interpersonal meaning within discourses, exploring how communicators express and negotiate their emotions, attitudes, and opinions with their audience within a given context. It offers an analysis of meanings “by which texts convey positive or negative assessments” (White, 2015, p. 1).

AT is divided into three subsystems: Attitude, which deals with feelings; Engagement, which is about “sourcing attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse” and Graduation is concerned with “grading phenomena whereby feelings are amplified and categories blurred” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 35). In the context of our research on Malaysian English news coverage and its stance towards China, we are particularly interested in the Attitude subsystem, as it is a meaning system for mapping feelings constructed in the discourse. The subsystem of Attitude can be further divided into three subcategories, namely, AFFECT, JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION. They are in response to three semantic regions: emotion, ethics, and aesthetics, respectively.

AFFECT is about the polarity of feelings, that is, whether the feeling is positive or negative. It can be divided into two sub-types, *realis* (reaction) and *irrealis* (intention), and *realis* can be further divided into *un/happiness* (if people feel happy or sad), *dis/satisfaction* (whether people are pleased or angry) and *in/security* (if people feel assured or anxious), while *dis/inclination* (whether people desire to do something or not) belongs to *irrealis* (Martin & White, 2005).

JUDGEMENT is about ethics, whether the behaviour aligns with certain criteria. It can be further divided into two types: *social esteem* and *social sanction*. *Social esteem* consists of *normality* (whether the behaviour is considered normal), *capacity* (the capability manifested) and *tenacity* (how dependable), while *social sanction* includes *propriety* (how ethical) and *veracity* (how truthful). In the meantime, JUDGEMENT also reflects different modalisation, as “normality is to usuality, as capacity is to ability, as tenacity is to inclination, as veracity is to probability, as propriety is to obligation” (ibid, p. 54).

APPRECIATION is about aesthetics or the significance of an event/entity. It can be generally divided into three types, namely *reaction*, *composition* and *valuation*. *Reaction* focuses on the quality or impact of things; *composition* is concerned with balance and complexity; *valuation* is about the worth of things (ibid).

As this study is to examine attitudes towards China, abstract entities, such as the Chinese government, China’s economy and the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China, etc., are appraised as they are administered by people (Cavasso & Taboada, 2021). In this study, when we explore the attitudes of Malaysian news towards China, we focus on understanding public emotions—whether they are positive or negative towards individuals or entities associated with China. Additionally, we examine how behaviours are judged and how values are assigned to various phenomena or objects related to China.

#### APPLICATIONS OF AT

Appraisal Theory (AT) is focused on the interpersonal meanings within discourse, examining how speakers and writers express and negotiate their feelings, attitudes, and opinions with their audience. This theory is extensively utilised in discourse analysis across various fields, such as narratives (Page, 2003), movie reviews (Taboada et al., 2014), literary works (Iswara, 2016), public responses (Sayogie et al., 2023) and news discourse (Arunsirot, 2012; Engelbrecht, 2020; Grundlingh, 2017). These applications underscore AT's versatility in revealing the evaluative language within diverse textual environments.

The robust application of AT is particularly notable within the realm of news discourse, which offers a fascinating lens through which to observe the construction and utilisation of language in shaping socio-political realities. Arunsirot (2012) delved into the sentiment expressed within 32 Thai newspaper commentaries on the ASEAN Summit disruption in 2009 and discovered that Thai commentators skilfully employed evaluative lexis, rhetorical strategies and comparative intertextuality to articulate their perspectives and sway their readership through persuasive commentary. Engelbrecht (2020) focused on the discourse surrounding rhino poaching within 25 news articles sourced from Sketch Engine and NewsBank and uncovered the deliberate use of evaluative language in the news reports to mobilise readers against the act of poaching. Cavasso and Taboada (2021) carried out a corpus analysis of online news comments on the website of *The Globe and Mail* between 2012 and 2016 and found that highly opinionated language is usually categorised as JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION rather than as AFFECT, probably because speakers wish to isolate themselves from their opinions in the commentary. The three studies have proven the applicability of AT in analysing news reports.

Besides using the complete Appraisal Framework, some researchers have focused on exploring specific subsystems of AT for discourse analysis. Bednarek and Caple (2010) analysed 40 environmental reports in *The Sydney Morning Herald* from Attitude and Graduation. They added new subcategories to the subsystems of Attitude and Graduation to tailor to their need and found that the environmental events were construed as negative through APPRECIATION and important/serious through Graduation. Jakaza and Visser (2016) investigated only the expression of AFFECT in the news of contentious parliamentary debates and discovered that news authors utilise interpersonal meanings to either align with or distance themselves from readers. Grundlingh (2017) chose corpora of 4 murder cases of about 100,000 words to identify obvious sensationalism in the reports and found that JUDGEMENT was the most frequent form of attitude present while AFFECT was the least frequent. Puspita and Pranoto's (2021) research delved into the attitudinal expressions employed by Japanese newspapers in the context of disaster reporting by examining 100 news articles from 2019 to 2020 and discerned a similar pattern of prevalence of JUDGEMENT over AFFECT, indicating a tendency towards evaluative commentary rather than an expression of the victims' emotions.

AT has demonstrated its significance in identifying emotive language within news reporting, challenging the notion of its objective nature. The framework, with its three subsystems of Attitude, Engagement and Graduation, offers researchers a flexible tool that can be used holistically or selectively, tailored to the specific aims of their analysis. Moreover, AT's adaptability is evidenced by its capacity to be customised for particular research needs, proving essential for detailed examinations across various discourses. The above studies, however, either focused on commentaries only or examined news articles within a comparatively short time frame. This study examines news articles of various columns over a 10-year period, intending to carry out a more comprehensive and diachronic investigation on how attitudinal resources are applied in China-

related news. Besides, most of the above studies, except for Cavasso and Taboada (2021), are purely subjective qualitative analyses in which the annotation process is often neglected or omitted. As the annotation process is very subjective, we will elaborate on how the annotation is carried out to ensure significant results in the following section.

## METHODOLOGY

Manual annotation will be adopted. According to Spooren and Degand (2010), one possible strategy for annotation is double coding: the entire data is coded by two annotators separately and independently first, and then discussions are made to reach a full consensus for all the disagreements. In this study, an adapted double coding is adopted. That is, the annotation is done by three annotators independently; only the result that is consistent between any two annotators will be regarded as the final annotation.

## DATA SELECTION

News articles for analysis were selected from the 65-million-word Corpus of China-Related News of *The Star Online* (2012 - 2021). The Belt and Road Initiative was put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, and the timeframe chosen encapsulates a period of strengthening ties and increasing dialogue between Malaysia and China. We observed that the frequency of the term *China* varied significantly in the aforesaid corpus. Some news articles mentioned China only in passing, often because it was the location of an event, thus not central to the content or sentiment of the article. To avoid instances where *China* might have a high frequency in a very long article but contribute only a small percentage, indicating a potential lack of relevance to China, we used a formula in Excel to count the frequency of *China* in each article and divided it by the total word count of the article. We then selected the article with the highest ratio, as it shows higher relevancy to China. Since manual analysis is labour-intensive, a strategic selection of only 10 articles – one from each year between 2012 and 2021 – was made to reflect a broad spectrum of views and the evolution of media attitudes towards China for this initial study. Information about the news selected is listed in the following table.

TABLE 1. List of selected news articles

Year	News Title	% of <i>China</i>	+/-	News Summary
2012	China: Reality vs perception	3.49%	-	The journalist disagreed with negative perceptions of China's economic slowdown and believed that China's property market interventions and banking practices might mitigate severe fallout.
2013	Peaceful rise is not forever	2.59%	-	As the world's second largest economy, China could not continue with its "peaceful rise" alone. China has made some wrong turns in its foreign policy and must adapt its strategy to the changing global landscape.
2014	A bigger global role in China?	3.12%	-	Western countries called for China to take on obligations as a developed country. However, China maintaining its developing-country status would lift the pressure on other developing countries, including Malaysia.
2015	Wave of China investments likely	2.7%	-	China announced a series of measures, including buying Malaysian bonds and encouraging more investments in Malaysia, which showed China's optimistic outlook on Malaysia and improved sentiment in Malaysia's financial market.
2016	China's factor in the ASEAN stage	3.96%	-	Both China and some ASEAN nations had overlapping claims on the South China Sea, but Malaysia chose to be silent towards it due to economic and political reasons.

2017	Trade can be boosted by several-fold	3.47%	-	International Trade and Industry Minister II Datuk Ong said that collaboration with other BRI countries would bring potential benefits and that it would be unwise for Malaysia to turn away from China.
2018	Sino-Malaysia investments perk up	3.44%	-	In a two-day China Conference in Kuala Lumpur, many speakers expressed their optimism on Malaysia-China ties. In their point of view, Malaysia had benefited from China's BRI projects.
2019	Icy Malaysia-China relations set to thaw	2.79%	-	Despite a <i>WSJ</i> report "exposing" deals between Malaysia and China on 1MDB, both sides seemed calm towards the report, and the strain in bilateral relations was soothing with a desire from both sides to renew cooperation.
2020	China extends a helping hand	2.23%	-	China donated to WHO and provided medical help and supplies to countries hard hit by the epidemic to repay the goodwill China received during the hardest times.
2021	Easy access to the growing China market	3.64%	+	A China A-Shares ETF, managed by Value Partners Malaysia, made its debut. The co-founder of Value Partners showed his confidence in China's economic growth.

It can be observed from TABLE 1 that the lowest ratio of *China* in the selected articles is 2.23%, which means *China* appears at least twice for every hundred words, suggesting a strong likelihood that the subject matter is centred around China or its related aspects. To provide readers with context regarding the selected articles, both the sentiment polarity results derived from our preceding sentiment analysis (Wu et al., 2022) and summaries of the news content are provided. The summaries indicate that the focus of the selected articles is on issues related to China. Despite the predominance of negative sentiment in nine out of ten texts from our previous study, this does not necessarily equate to negative attitudes towards China. Hence, our current aim is to delve deeper into the attitudes towards China by examining the attitudinal resources employed in these articles. By comparing the results of discourse analysis with those from sentiment analysis, we hope to evaluate the accuracy of sentiment analysis tools when applied to a more curated set of news texts.

#### ANNOTATION PROCESS

We used the existing Attitude scheme (FIGURE 1) in *UAM CorpusTool* version 6.2 (O'Donnell, 2023) for annotation, adapting the polarity of "ambiguous" to "neutral" to better suit our needs. We used "social-valuation" preset in the scheme instead of "valuation" as the term is more specific. Since the purpose of the study was to examine attitudes towards China, only attitudinal features directed towards China were marked; attitudes towards others were not the focus of this study. All relevant attitudinal resources directed to China fitting into the scheme were hence identified and classified into three subcategories, namely, AFFECT, JUDGEMENT, and APPRECIATION.

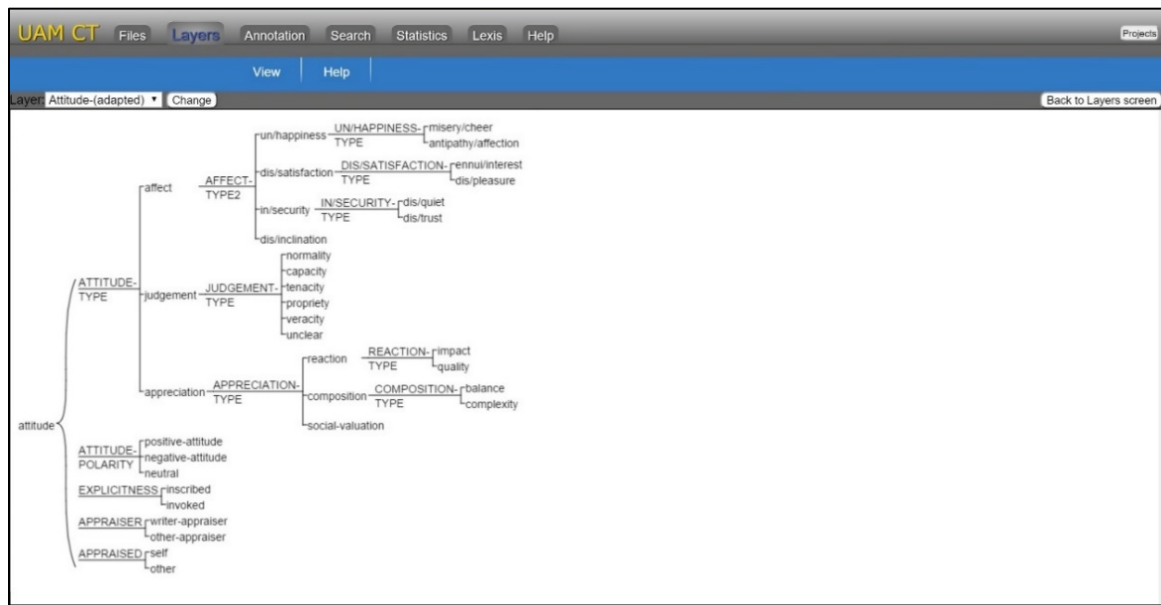


FIGURE 1. Interface of the attitudinal scheme in *UAM CorpusTool* (adapted from O'Donnell, 2023)

We employed three annotators, one of the authors of this article and two of her colleagues (hereinafter referred to as A, B and C, respectively), all of whom have a background in linguistics and are familiar with AT. To ensure consistency and reliability, the annotation process was divided into four stages. In the first stage, one of the ten news articles was annotated by the three annotators separately. In the second stage, the discrepancy in the annotation of the news article was thoroughly discussed until agreement was reached. In the third stage, with the agreed rules as the golden principle, the three annotators finished the annotation on their own. In the last stage, the annotation results by three annotators were compared and only when at least two annotators concurred with one another (the markables are the same or at least overlapping, and the Appraisal type is the same) would the annotation be taken as final.

#### SOLUTION TO DISCREPANCY

Since annotation is highly subjective, one discrepancy is the selection of the markables. The three annotators sometimes disagreed with the markables, as in (1). After discussion, the annotators heeded the advice of Cavasso and Taboada (2021) to incorporate as much context as necessary when determining the polarity of any given text segment, recognising that sometimes a single word may not fully convey an attitude. Therefore, in (1), not only *strong* but also the evaluated entity *China's economic activity* was taken as the markable.

- (1)A: ...the smiling BOC banker jokingly said it showed **China's economic activity was strong** [Appreciation: Quality +], contrary to many pundit's predictions that China was on the verge of economic collapse. (2012)  
 (1)B: ...the smiling BOC banker jokingly said it showed **China's economic activity was strong** [Appreciation: Quality +], contrary to many pundit's predictions that **China was on the verge of economic collapse** [Appreciation: Quality -].  
 (1)C: ...the smiling BOC banker jokingly said it showed China's economic activity was **strong** [Appreciation: Quality +], contrary to many pundit's predictions that China was on the verge of economic collapse.

Another discrepancy in the annotation is whether all the attitudes should be marked. In (1), there are two opposite opinions: China's economic activity was strong, and China was on the verge of economic collapse. It's obvious that the banker had much faith in China's economy and that he disagreed with the prediction that China's economy was about to collapse. After careful consideration, the three annotators agreed that when there are two opposing viewpoints regarding the same entity in one single sentence, only the one that could best explain the journalist's intention is kept. Therefore, A's annotation of (1) was taken as the final version.

#### POLARITY

The polarity of the annotations is an important indicator in this study. As we are examining the attitude of Malaysian media towards China, attitudes that are in favour of China are taken as positive, otherwise, they will be labelled as negative, and attitudes that are neither in favour of nor against China will be labelled as neutral.

(2) *For decades, China has been careful not to assert itself at the forefront of the UN's economic and social affairs, focusing instead on its own economic development and insisting that it is **a poor or average developing country**.* (2014)

(3) *In my session, I gave the view that **China is still very much a developing country**, and its high standing as the world's number two economy and number one trading nation is due more to its large population.* (2014)

The expressions of *poor* and *developing countries* have negative implications, suggesting that the country's economy is weak and that the country is underdeveloped. In the context of the 2014 article, however, the journalist's use of *poor* and *developing countries* to describe China's economic status should not be interpreted as derogatory. Given China's vast population, its economic magnitude is substantial, but on a per capita basis, it remains in line with other developing nations, including Malaysia. The debate around China's designation as a developing country reflects the complexities of global economic categorisations. In the article, *poor* and *average* underscore a factual representation of China's per capita economic standing rather than a qualitative judgment. Therefore, they were annotated as "neutral" in the study since they present an objective stance rather than a positive or negative sentiment.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Attitudinal analysis of the 10 articles provides an indicative reflection of Malaysia's attitudes towards China. This section will focus on three main aspects: the overall polarity of attitude present within these texts, the prominent linguistic resources employed to convey these attitudes, and implications of such results.

#### POLARITY OF ATTITUDE

After the final annotation is marked, the Statistics Function of *UAM CorpusTool* is used to generate the annotation results. TABLE 2 presents the polarity of attitudinal expressions towards China across different years. It reveals a notable difference in the polarity of attitudinal resources when compared to the sentiment analysis outcomes of our earlier study (Wu et al., 2022). In contrast to the predominantly negative sentiment identified previously, with the sole exception being the positive sentiment in the 2021 article, as shown in TABLE 1, 9 out of the 10 news articles

demonstrate a notable presence of positive attitude, and over 80% of positive resources are predominant in three-fifths of the 10 articles, which further proves our conclusion in the previous study that the negative sentiment in the news article does not necessarily reflect the negative sentiment towards China.

TABLE 2. Polarity of Attitude

Attitude-Polarity		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
-positive	N	12	13	12	59	42	38	30	39	31	11	285
	%	66.7	30.2	63.2	96.7	84	95	96.8	75	96.9	100	80.4
-negative	N	5	28	2	1	6	2	1	9	1	0	55
	%	27.8	65.1	10.5	1.6	12	5	3.2	17.3	3.1	0	15.4
-neutral	N	1	2	5	1	2	0	0	4	0	0	15
	%	5.6	4.7	26.3	1.6	4	0	0	7.7	0	0	4.2

In contrast, the negative attitude presents a different distribution pattern. Negative attitudes comprise just 15.4%, roughly one-sixth of the total. The 2013 article has the highest occurrences of negative resources, appearing 28 times and representing 65.1% of the text. This indicates that the article focuses on content evoking negativeness or highlighting unfortunate events related to China. Overall, the analysis points to a generally positive portrayal of China in the sampled news articles, except for the 2013 article, which diverges from this trend by primarily highlighting negative elements. This distribution of sentiment underscores the complexity of attitudes conveyed in media and suggests that while there may be periods of critical reporting, the overarching narrative over the span of years leans towards the positive.

#### PROMINENT ATTITUDINAL TYPES

TABLE 3 is the statistics of different attitudinal resources. This indicates that JUDGMENT constitutes the largest proportion (47.1%) of the attitudinal resources identified in the analysis, surpassing those of APPRECIATION and AFFECT, which account for 31.4% and 21.6%, respectively. This suggests that the discourse surrounding China in these texts more frequently involves the evaluation of behaviours rather than the valuation of entities or the expression of emotional responses. The result of which is also consistent with Cavasso and Taboada's (2021) and Puspita and Pranoto's (2021) findings.

TABLE 3. Attitudinal resources (overall)

Attitude-Type	N	%
JUDGMENT	168	47.1
APPRECIATION	112	31.4
AFFECT	77	21.6
TOTAL:	357	100

#### ANALYSIS OF JUDGEMENT

The attitudinal resources of JUDGEMENT will be discussed first as they take up the majority of this study. JUDGEMENT refers to people's attitudes towards behaviour. The distribution of the different JUDGEMENT types is detailed in TABLE 4, highlighting the proportions of each category. The analysis will concentrate on the more significant categories: tenacity, propriety, and capacity.

TABLE 4. Use of JUDGEMENT type

JUDGEMENT-type		N	%
Social Esteem	- tenacity	54	32.1
	- capacity	44	26.2
	- normality	18	10.7
Social Sanction	- propriety	48	28.6
	- veracity	4	2.4
TOTAL:		168	100

*Attitudinal Resources of Tenacity.* TABLE 4 reveals that tenacity is the dominant JUDGEMENT type, accounting for 32.1% of the JUDGEMENT resources, represented by 54 linguistic resources. The finding underscores that the dependability of China is frequently discussed in news articles, most of which convey a positive evaluation.

(4) *China started the Belt and Road Initiative, and Xi shows that he is committed to providing the leadership and impetus for this mega project.* (2017)

(5) *During his four-day visit, Li pledged support for financial stability in Malaysia and promised to buy more bonds.* (2019)

(4) and (5) are the evaluations of the Chinese President and Chinese Premier. From the two excerpts, we can see that President Xi has shown his determination to lead and provide assistance to the Belt and Road Initiative, and the success of this mega project would bring benefits to all countries involved, either in trade, investment or services, while Premier Li had committed to providing assistance to ensure the financial stability of Malaysia. Both of them display a positive intent and a willingness to contribute to regional development and the economic well-being of Malaysia.

(6) *As long as China is committed to providing leadership and capital investment, this trend of development cannot be stopped by anyone – including the West, the critics and sceptics.* (2017)

(7) *As the pandemic spreads to other parts of the global community, China is determined to help those affected by sharing its medical expertise and supplies.* (2020)

(6) and (7) are the evaluation of China as an entity. (6) is from an interview with Datuk Ong, International Trade and Industry Minister II. His remark shows that Malaysia regarded China as a reliable partner. It was with this belief and confidence that Datuk Ong, on behalf of the Malaysian government, signed the MoU with China to deepen economic development and cooperation. In (7), “determined” indicates China’s strong commitment or resolution to assist countries affected by COVID-19, from which we may infer that China is regarded as a dependable country that would actively help others in a time of need. The linguistic resource of tenacity is concerned with how dependable the evaluated entity is. Among the 54 linguistic resources of tenacity, only 4 of them convey a negative attitude.

*Attitudinal Resources of Propriety.* The second most common form of JUDGEMENT is propriety. More than one-fourth of the JUDGEMENT resources associated with the feature of propriety are observed, and within this subset, three-fourths convey a positive evaluation.

(8) *After a visit to China in late February, Bruce Aylward, team leader of the WHO-China Joint Mission on COVID-19, praised China’s handling of the epidemic outbreak.* (2020)

(9) *China sacrificed the economy of Hubei province to buy time for the world to be better prepared for the virus.* (2020)

In (8), the word “praised” shows Bruce Aylward’s positive assessment of China’s efforts in dealing with the epidemic outbreak, indicating that China’s actions were suitable and worth commendation. More examples of propriety can be found, such as “magnanimous” (referring to China’s President Xi) and “generous” (relating to the purchase price offered by CGNPC for power assets in Malaysia), reflecting positive assessments. It can be inferred from (9) that China made a strategic decision to lock down Hubei province to prioritise the containment of COVID-19 over Hubei’s economic well-being, which gave the global community more time to better prepare for the virus. This also suggests that China considered the immediate health crisis to be of greater importance than the short-term economic interests.

*Attitudinal Resources of Capacity.* Closely following tenacity, the third frequent JUDGEMENT type is capacity. This emphasis is reflective of China’s significant economic milestones, notably its ascendancy to become the world’s second-largest economy in 2010, surpassing Japan. Among the 43 linguistic expressions of capacity, over 80% convey a positive sentiment, often highlighting China’s economic robustness or the flourishing economic and trade collaborations between China and Malaysia.

(10) *China has been the biggest importer of Malaysian commodities and goods for the past nine years.* (2016)

(11) *China has been Malaysia’s largest trading partner for nine consecutive years and has been a leading FDI in recent years.* (2019)

In (10), the fact that China had been the “biggest importer” of Malaysian products for several years implies the following: 1) it signifies a substantial level of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries; 2) it indicates that China’s demand for Malaysian products or resources could have a significant impact on the Malaysian economy. In (11), the “largest trading partner” implies that China has been playing an important role in Malaysia’s foreign trade. Though not explicitly, the sentence underscored an acknowledgement of China’s robust economic capabilities.

Of course, when talking about China, positive sentiment is not always the case. Though China has stunning economic development and impressive economic capacity, (12) points out that China is often perceived as ineffective in communicating its values and culture to the global audience, while (13) indicates that China needs improvement to formulate its foreign policy. Both suggest China’s incompetence in one way or another.

(12) *It is often said China lacks soft power communication skills.* (2013)

(13) *It has to develop the skills of subtle diplomacy as well as the ability to make foreign policy with a strategy to achieve its end.* (2013)

#### ANALYSIS OF APPRECIATION

“APPRECIATION involves evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena, according to the ways in which they are valued or not in a given field” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 43). TABLE 5 presents the distribution of different APPRECIATION types. The resources for reaction had the highest count and percentage among all, followed by social-valuation. This section will only focus on these two types.

TABLE 5. Use of APPRECIATION type

APPRECIATION-type	N		N	%
-reaction	58	- quality	34	30.4
		- impact	24	21.4
-social-valuation	40		40	35.7
-composition	14	- complexity	8	7.1
		- balance	6	5.4
TOTAL:			112	100

*Attitudinal Resources of Reaction.* Reactions are concerned with the quality or impact of the evaluated entity and are dominant in this analysis. Most of them exhibit a positive attitude. For linguistic resources of quality, it has to do with the reaction that catches people's attention.

(14) *Noting that China has a very vibrant private sector and the world's largest Internet population, he encourages Malaysian investors to focus on the Greater Bay Basin.* (2018)

In (14), "vibrant" suggests that China has a dynamic and active private business environment, which contributes to a thriving economy; "the world's largest Internet population" indicates that China has a large number of Internet users, which implies a large online community within the country. The combination of a vibrant private sector and the largest Internet population indicates that there may be opportunities for businesses to innovate and adopt new technologies to reach a broad audience.

Besides, expressions such as "strong bond", "close ties", and "warm friendship", etc. can also be found to describe the positive and robust relationships between China and Malaysia in these articles. "Strong bond" and "close ties" indicate a level of mutual trust and understanding between the nations, and "warm friendship" often goes beyond government-level interactions, which suggests that there is a positive sentiment among the citizens of both countries towards each other.

Linguistic resources of impact have to do with the reaction that pleases people.

(15) *As countries have benefited economically, the MoUs China has signed with individual countries will eventually end up as a free trade agreement (FTA).* (2017)

(16) *It is to the benefit of both countries to have warm relations," says Li, the president of the China Entrepreneurs Association in Malaysia.* (2019)

We may infer from (15) a potential progression in international agreements. Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) that China has signed with individual countries may evolve into more comprehensive agreements, specifically free trade agreements. This implies a deepening and broadening of economic cooperation over time, as well as a pragmatic and mutually beneficial approach to international economic relations. In (16), the statement from Li, the president of the China Entrepreneurs Association in Malaysia, suggests that maintaining positive and friendly relations is beneficial for both China and Malaysia. Both countries stand to gain from maintaining positive diplomatic and economic ties, which aligns with the idea of win-win cooperation in international relations.

*Attitudinal Resources of Social-valuation.* Social-valuation is about people's considered opinions. Among the APPRECIATION resources, nearly one-third of which are about social-valuation, that is, how the Malaysians value China. Besides, among the 39 resources of social-valuation, four-fifths of which are positive.

(17) *At the same time, in absolute terms, China has become economically important, and its actions have significantly influenced the global economy and environment.* (2014)

(18) *China has been creative in its help extended to developing nations.* (2017)

China is now the world's second-largest economy. Both (17) and (18) illustrate an appreciation for China's growing influence and innovative approach to international aid. (17) emphasises the importance of China's role in the global economy, acknowledging China's significant economic growth and the impact of its large population, resources, and manufacturing capabilities. China is regarded as an essential player on the world stage, whose development has earned it a prominent economic status. (18) features a statement from Minister Datuk Ong, who commends China for its "creative" methods of assisting developing nations. Rather than direct aid, China opts for soft loans aimed at infrastructure, which can foster trade and improve living conditions. The term "creative" underscores a strategic and thoughtful form of support that goes beyond traditional aid, reflecting a positive view of China's role in international development.

Conversely, a notable portion of resources signalling negative attitude comes from the news article of 2013. It highlighted several challenges encountered by China amidst its economic growth, such as rising income disparity, environmental degradation, etc. The journalist critically referred to these issues of inequality as societal "ills" and a "plague", underlining strong disapproval. Environmental concerns were further emphasised with terms like "degradation" and "deterioration", attributing them to the negative impacts of economic expansion. Given the article's focus on the adverse aspects of China's development, it stands out as the sole piece with a predominantly negative stance towards China in the analysis.

#### ANALYSIS OF AFFECT

"AFFECT is concerned with registering positive and negative feelings" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 42). TABLE 6 outlines the frequency and percentages of different AFFECT types within the 10 articles. Resources expressing dis/inclination dominate, trailed by those expressing in/security. Un/happiness and dis/satisfaction each comprise roughly 12%. Given their more substantial representation, the discussion will centre on dis/inclination and in/security.

TABLE 6 Use of AFFECT type

AFFECT-type	N		N	%
- dis/inclination	35		35	45.4
- in/security	23	- dis/trust	13	16.9
		- dis/quiet	10	13
un/happiness	10	- antipathy/affection	7	9.1
		- misery/cheer	3	3.9
- dis/satisfaction	9	- dis/pleasure	9	11.7
		- ennui/interest	0	0
TOTAL:			77	100

*Attitudinal Resources of Dis/inclination.* This attitudinal type is about intention rather than reaction, taking up nearly 50% of the total resources of AFFECT, most of which are positive ones.

(19) *China is willing to help Malaysia mainly because of its strong bond with Malaysia.* (2015)

(20) *Analysts note that there is no fear that the Malaysian leader will adopt a pro-China stance as there is backing from Malaysians.* (2016)

(19) indicates China's inclination to assist Malaysia and that the assistance is not solely transactional out of immediate needs but is influenced by a deeper and positive relationship between China and Malaysia. The "pro-China stance" in (20) occurred 4 times in the 10 articles, 2 of which were used to describe Malaysia's Prime Minister and 2 of which were used to describe the country Malaysia. This shows that either Malaysia as a country or the leader of Malaysia was in favour of China.

*Attitudinal Resources of In/security.* In the resources of in/security, which deals with feelings of peace and anxiety, dis/quiet and dis/trust are almost evenly distributed.

(21) *The top leaders are very friendly towards each other, and they have shown **they trust each other very much**.* (2015)

(22) *Cheah said he was **optimistic about China's economic growth**.* (2021)

"The top leaders" in (21) referred to the state leaders of Malaysia and China. Datuk Seri Najib Razak served as the Prime Minister of Malaysia from 2009 to 2018 and maintained a close relationship with China's leaders. Under his administration, several major deals were made with China. The term "trust" signifies a sense of confidence and belief shared between the leaders of the two countries, which suggests a willingness to work together towards common goals and a higher probability of cooperation between the two nations. In (22), "optimistic" indicates a positive and hopeful view towards China's economic growth. Cheah, the co-founder of Value Partners, has confidence in China's economic potential and is expecting favourable developments and improvements in China's economic performance, which may bring potential investment opportunities in China.

#### IMPLICATIONS

The current discourse analysis based on AT suggests that positive attitudes are much more common, dominating in 9 out of the 10 examined articles. We can also infer from the 10 selected news articles that China, including Chinese leaders, is often depicted as a trustworthy partner in *The Star Online*, who is always willing and ready to extend assistance to promote regional stability and development. The use of such expressions suggests that the two countries share a positive and cooperative diplomatic relationship, as well as friendly people-to-people communication. This implies that there is a significant portion of the Malaysian population that approves of closer relations with China and that the leader's stance is in harmony with that of the Malaysian public, which also suggests that the Malaysian leader is comfortable adopting a pro-China attitude due to the support received from Malaysians, contributing to political confidence in pursuing closer relations with China. Besides, China's promising economic prospects and established economic capacity have given Malaysians confidence in maintaining robust economic relations with China. Anticipating positive advancements in China's economic performance, Malaysians foresee potential investment opportunities. China's remarkable economic growth and substantial economic capabilities further underscore these expectations. The fact that most of these news articles are more likely to convey positive news stories or highlight positive aspects of China suggests a favourable media environment for both China and Malaysia to maintain positive and friendly relations.

## CONCLUSION

Discourse analysis using AT as the framework reveals that the 10 selected China-related news articles in *The Star Online* reflect a generally positive attitude towards China. The predominance of positive linguistic resources indicates that positive JUDGMENT, AFFECT, and APPRECIATION outweigh the negative. This pilot study demonstrates the workability of AT, which serves as a valuable resource for understanding Malaysian media's perceptions of China, allowing for a more detailed understanding of the subtleties in language that contribute to the overall sentiment. In the meantime, the contrast in findings between the current manual analysis and the previous automated sentiment analysis underscores the complexity of sentiment analysis and the potential subtleties that automated tools might miss. Automated sentiment analysis may not be able to classify easily a complex range of sentiments expressed in the news, nor can it reflect the sentiment towards a certain entity in the news. Such tools might overlook the context or the way certain terms are used in relation to others. Hence, manual analysis becomes crucial in providing a comprehensive sentiment overview. A possible solution to enhance automated sentiment analysis is to incorporate manual efforts, with human annotators setting large enough samples for machines to learn and human reviewers to validate and correct sentiment predictions.

The analysis of attitudinal resources demonstrates that JUDGMENT occupies the most significant portion among the attitudinal resources, followed by APPRECIATION, while AFFECT takes up the least proportion. The finding is consistent with previous research (Cavasso & Taboada, 2021) in that news tends to be objective, and journalists prefer to be distant from their readers; hence, strong emotional expressions are less employed. Therefore, we discover a higher emphasis on assessing behaviour and construing emotional reactions rather than evaluating the value of things when discussing China in these news articles. Through analysis of these linguistic resources, we find that the positive attitudes towards China include recognition of China's economic strength and overall performance and the reliability of China-Malaysia relations, reflecting Malaysian's positive perception of China, that the country is dependable and effective in fulfilling responsibilities, and Malaysian people's faith in favourable outcomes in the future. That is, when reporting on China, the image of a country with a strong economy that is also willing to cooperate with other countries is construed; simultaneously, they portray the relationship between China and Malaysia as amicable and close. The linguistic strategies in these articles serve the purpose of nurturing a climate of trust and stability conducive to fostering cooperation and mutual investment, which aligns with the Malaysian government's objectives of strengthening ties with China.

The study, however, is not without limitations. Firstly, AT, despite its widespread application in discourse analysis, involves a degree of subjectivity in the annotation process, relying heavily on the annotators' interpretation; besides, AT may not give sufficient attention to the broader sociopolitical context in which news is produced as it focuses more on linguistic features. Secondly, the number of texts selected for this study is limited, comprising only 10 news articles for annotation. The results, naturally, apply only to this specific context but are likely indicative of the nature of China-related news on *The Star Online*, which is a mainstream newspaper in Malaysia. In the following research, intercoder reliability will be assessed to guarantee the validity of the annotations. Other factors, such as political, cultural, and social factors, shall be considered, and a larger and more varied set of articles will be examined to validate the findings presented in this study. Examination of other media formats (e.g., social media, etc.) and a comparative study of media portrayals of China in other ASEAN countries can also be carried out to further explore media discourses on international relations.

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